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ABSTRACT

Median test scores on the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) for many District of Columbia public schools declined substantially in 1990, although this decline was not evident in reports from school officials. These declines occurred at elementary, junior high, and senior high school levels, in grades 6, 9, and 11, respectively. They also occurred in both reading and mathematics, affecting schools in all wards of the city. In general, schools with the highest scores in reading for 1990 had a history of either remaining stable or improving during the previous three years, but this was not true of the schools with the lowest scores. In addition, overwhelming numbers of schools were substantially below the national norm for reading. While mathematics scores were slightly better than reading scores at the junior and senior high school levels, they continued their generally negative trend. Elementary level mathematics scores seem much better at first glance, but this is deceptive because the CTBS require mainly computational skills at this level, and few if any higher-order thinking skills. Recommendations are offered for improving the following areas: (1) testing policies; (2) the curriculum and instructional materials; (3) teachers and teaching strategies; (4) the distribution of financial resources to schools in various parts of the city; and (5) the method for collecting and disseminating statistical data. Statistical data are presented in seven tables and three graphs. A list of 10 references and detailed statistical data on improvements and declines by school and by level are appended. (FMW)

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Research Notes on Education
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No. 7 October 1990

Improvement and Decline in D.C. Public Schools

CTBS Test Scores, 1987–1990

Median test scores for many District of Columbia public schools declined substantially in 1990, although this was not evident from public reports by D.C. school officials. These declines occurred at elementary, junior high, and senior high school levels, in grades 6, 9, and 11, respectively. They also occurred in both reading and mathematics, affecting schools in all wards of the city.

In general, schools with the highest scores in reading for 1990 had a history of either remaining stable or getting better during the previous three years, but this was not true of the schools with the lowest scores. In addition, overwhelming numbers of schools were substantially below the national norm for reading. While mathematics scores were slightly better than reading scores at the junior and senior high school levels, elementary level scores are deceptive in that they seem much better.

These findings lead to the conclusion that it is necessary to make fundamental reassessments of testing policies, the curriculum and materials, the teachers and their teaching strategies, the distribution of financial resources to schools in various parts of the city, and the method for collecting and disseminating research data to keep the public informed of progress in the school system.

D.C. Public School Reports

When the test scores of students in D.C. public schools are released each year, school officials publicly describe them only in terms of the overall performance of all students in the District (*The Report*, 1988 and 1990; *In Our Schools*, 1989). These composite scores often reflect what appears to be improvement in the system as a whole. Unfortunately, they conceal the downward slide among large segments of students in the city. The effect of reporting only aggregate trends is to leave many parents uninformed about the scope and depth of the academic tragedy in D.C. schools.

A Tale of Two Cities

In an earlier report, the Institute for Independent Education demonstrated that there were two distinct academic cities in the District of Columbia. This neighborhood study examined schools by zip codes, which have boundaries that are more discrete than those of either city wards or school regions, and they also facilitate the analysis of demographic data.

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Table 1

Number of Schools Improved or Declined in Reading

(Test Periods May 1987 to May 1990)

	1987-1988	1988-1989	1989-1990
Elementary – Gr. 6 *(114-115 schools)*			
Improved	67 (58%)	67 (58%)	46 (41%)
No Change	3 (3%)	5 (4%)	6 (5%)
Declined	45 (39%)	43 (38%)	62 (54%)
	115 (100%)	115	114
Junior High - Gr. 9 *(27-28 schools)*			
Improved	14 (52%)	17 (61%)	9 (32%)
No Change	1 (4%)	0	0
Declined	12 (44%)	11 (39%)	19 (68%)
	27 (100%)	28	28
Senior High - Gr. 11 *(14 schools)*			
Improved	7 (50%)	12 (86%)	3 (21%)
No Change	2 (14%)	0	0
Declined	5 (36%)	2 (14%)	11 (79%)
	14 (100%)	14	14

Source: Institute summary of median percentiles, Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Form U, District of Columbia Public Schools.

Table 2

Number of Schools Improved or Declined in Mathematics

(Test Periods May 1987 to May 1990)

	1987-88	1988-89	1989-90
Elementary - Gr. 6 *(114-115 schools)*			
Improved	56 (49%)	64 (56%)	46 (41%)
No Change	5 (4%)	4 (3%)	6 (5%)
Declined	54 (47%)	47 (41%)	62 (54%)
	115 (100%)	115	114
Junior High - Gr. 9 *(27-28 schools)*			
Improved	12 (44%)	18 (64%)	11 (39%)
No Change	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)
Declined	14 (52%)	9 (32%)	16 (57%)
	27 (100%)	28	28
Senior High - Gr. 11 *(14 schools)*			
Improved	9 (64%)	10 (72%)	6 (43%)
No Change	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	3 (21%)
Declined	4 (29%)	3 (21%)	5 (36%)
	14 (100%)	14	14

Source: Institute summary of median percentiles, Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Form U, District of Columbia Public Schools.

This report showed that while there were schools that had superior test performance in the 1987-88 school year, only 20 percent of all African Americans in this predominantly African-American city went to school in zip codes where schools were above norm. In fact, only 1 percent of all African Americans in the city went to school in the four zip codes where schools had the highest scores.

Declines in 1990

As many as 54 percent of all elementary schools declined in reading during 1990, along with 68 percent of the junior high school and 79 percent of the senior high schools (Table 1), in spite of considerable media attention to the fact that some schools in the District have improved.

The term "declined" means that the school had a lower median percentile than it had in the previous year (Appendix). Even if the new lower score is above the national norm, it is a negative reflection on the school and the school system. These declines are pervasive, they are extreme in many instances, and they clearly are not the occasional exception they should be.

The declines can be seen not only by looking at the growing number of schools in the past year that are classified as having declined but also by looking at the shrinking number of schools in the improved category. For example, from May of 1988 to May of 1989, approximately 58 percent of all elementary schools improved in reading, but from May 1989 to May 1990, only 41 percent of the elementary schools improved. There also was a drop in improvement among junior high schools (from 61 to 32 percent) and among senior high schools (from 86 to 21 percent).

There was a similar downward shift at all grade levels in mathematics among schools that showed improvement, and an increasing number of schools actually declined in performance (Table 2).

Although the schools test students in several categories, the two most fundamental are reading and mathematics. Approximately 76 percent of the elementary schools in the District declined in reading, or in mathematics, or in both categories simultaneously during 1990 (Table 3). By this same method of measurement, there also were declines in 75 percent of the junior high schools and 86 percent of the senior high schools.

The city wards most seriously affected at the elementary level were wards 1, 5, and 8, containing 38 percent of all elementary schools in the city (Table 4). These wards are widely recognized as

being predominantly African American, with large concentrations of low-income families.

On the other hand, even ward 3, the ward in which the most affluent residents tend to live, suffered losses that were not negligible. Most of the residents are European Americans, but there are also some high-income families from African-American and other cultural groups. Not only did ward 3 decline the least, but it has the least number of schools that are below the national norm (Table 5). Its more favorable starting position made the impact of a decline less severe.

Test History and the Quality of Education

In essence, the schools at which students traditionally performed well simply got better over the past four years, while the schools that were unstable got worse in 1990 (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

For example, taking a 9 percent sample of schools at each level, the top 10 elementary schools in reading jumped an average of 13 points between May 1989 and May 1990, from a median percentile rank of 71 to 84. The top three junior high schools (9 percent of 28) increased roughly 14 percentile points, and the top senior high school (9 percent of 14) remained stable. On the other hand, even though the worst schools experienced an artificial increase in 1989, they continued their generally negative tradition.

Furthermore, the gap between the top and worst performing schools in 1987 was dramatically wider in the higher grades, increasing from 23 points in grade 6 to 60 points in grade 11. By 1990, the gaps at the elementary and junior high levels had widened to 58 and 57 points, respectively. The gap at the senior high level narrowed slightly, but this was because over a four-year period, the top senior high school had declined three points.

In reading, the majority of elementary, junior high, and senior high students are not far from the condition of the worst schools (Figure 4). This is also true in mathematics for junior high and senior high schools (Figure 5).

The exception appears at first glance to be elementary mathematics students. The distribution approximates a normal curve, with the peak near a percentile of 60, which is above the national norm of 50.

If the mathematics scores are so high and the reading scores are so low, it is obvious that the elementary level mathematics in Form U of the CTBS requires mainly computational skills. In fact, only 11 percent of the mathematics test items in

Table 3
Number of Schools Changed on Combined Indicators
1989-1990

Types of Schools	*Number*	
Elementary		
Improved in reading and mathematics	28	(24%)
Declined in reading, math, or both	86	(76%)
	114	
Junior High		
Improved in reading and mathematics	7	(25%)
Declined in reading, math, or both	21	(75%)
	28	
Senior High		
Improved in reading and mathematics	2	(14%)
Declined in reading, math, or both	12	(86%)
	14	

Source: Institute summary of median percentiles, Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Form U District of Columbia Public Schools

Table 4
Decline in Elementary Schools by City Ward, 1989-1990

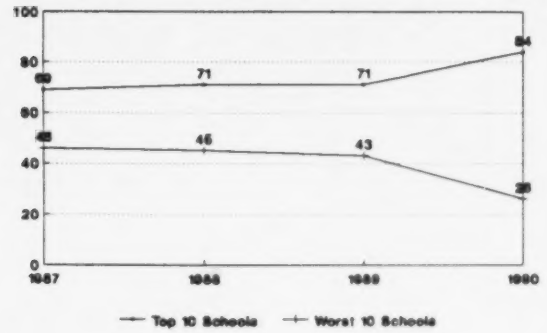
Ward	*Total Schools*	*Number Declining* *Reading*	*Math*
1*	12	6 (50%)	9 (75%)
2	12	6 (50%)	6 (50%)
3	8	3 (38%)	5 (63%)
4	14	7 (50%)	6 (43%)
5*	14	11 (79%)	10 (71%)
6	14**	5 (36%)	7 (50%)
7	23	11 (48%)	13 (57%)
8*	17	12 (71%)	11 (65%)

* Wards most seriously affected
** Data available for only 14 out of 15 schools.

Source: Institute summary of median percentiles, Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Form U, District of Columbia Public Schools.

Figure 1

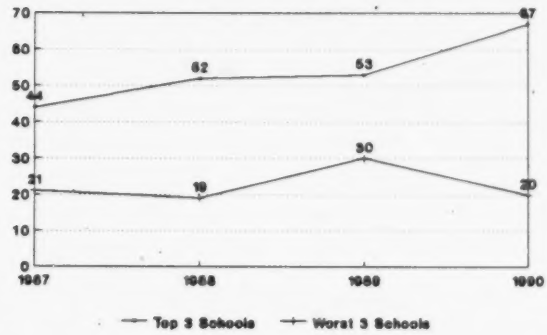
Test History, Top & Worst Schools, 1990
Reading, Grade 6, CTBS, Form U



Median Percentiles, D.C. Public Schools

Figure 2

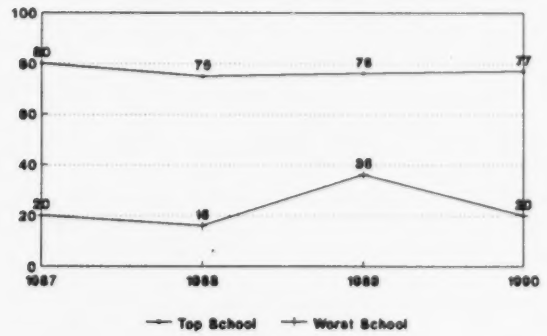
Test History, Top & Worst Schools, 1990
Reading, Grade 9, CTBS, Form U



Median Percentiles, D.C. Public Schools

Figure 3

Test History, Top & Worst Schools, 1990
Reading, Grade 11, CTBS, Form U



Median Percentiles, D.C. Public Schools

the CTBS at grade 6 require higher-order thinking skills such as the interpretation of language and problem solving, which have their foundation in reading skills. Only 13 percent at grade 9 and 14 percent at grade 11 require these skills ("Comprehensive Test," 1988).

Therefore, if the goal of the system is to have high expectations for its graduates, school officials may have selected an inappropriate elementary level standardized test.

There are at least two other conclusions that can be drawn. First, the decline that specifically occurred in 1989-90 may indicate a serious problem in teaching skills. Most people recognize that an individual child can have a bad day when a particular test is being given, but when an entire school district is negatively affected, it means that the problem may not lie with the students. The test has not changed in four years, nor has the officially published curriculum. Therefore, it is possible that many teachers are using idiosyncratic and singularly ineffective teaching strategies.

This view is supported by an evaluation which concluded that even though the secondary level mathematics curriculum matched the CTBS, teachers might not have been interpreting the stated curriculum objectives, at least up to 1987 (*An Evaluation*, pp. 33-34). It also is supported by the report of the D.C. Committee on Public Education, which noted a similar problem and called for a more careful integration of the curriculum, instruction, training, and testing in the school system (*Our Children*, p. 41).

Second, there is no existing program which tracks students individually across the system from year to year. School officials have suggested informally that student mobility (transferring from one school to another), may be a large part of the problem. There is no way to know for certain to what extent the preparation of children from one school does not match what they are assumed to know at the school to which they transfer.

Who Benefits?

The entire structure of public schools in the District gives the appearance of being maintained in its tragic state primarily for the benefit of only a small sector of the population.

African American youth constitute the largest enrollment in D.C. public schools (Table 6). However, there is a disproportionate number of one ethnic group in the top performing schools at the elementary level. Approximately 53 percent of European-American students take advantage of

Figure 4

Frequency of Percentiles in Reading
D.C. Public Schools, 1990

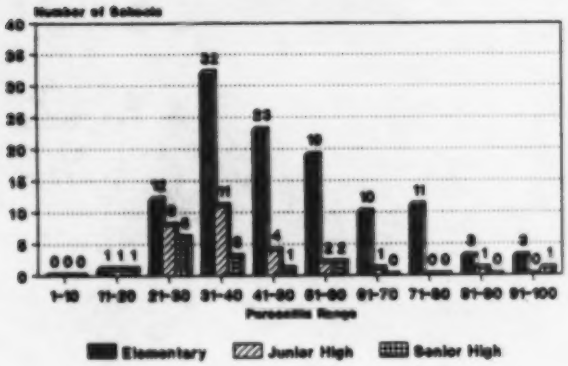
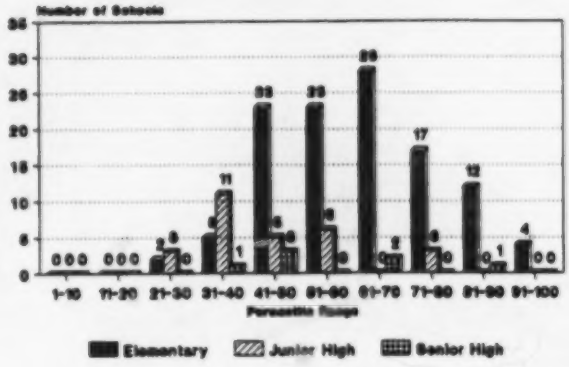


Figure 5

Frequency of Percentiles in Mathematics
D.C. Public Schools, 1990



these schools, compared to only 4 percent of the African-Americans (Table 7). These schools generally are found in the more affluent neighborhoods, where citizens have the least financial need for *free* education and seem to abandon the system after elementary school.

Consequently, it is not difficult to conclude that the top elementary schools are part of a feeder system for the more elite private schools in the Washington area, while other schools remain academic prisons from which few escape unless they elect to drop out of the system.

It is also well known that some parent/teacher associations (PTAs) make large contributions for teacher incentive grants, instructional materials, equipment, and learning opportunities for their students. They create what in effect are private-type schools for a few at taxpayers' expense.

Moreover, it is difficult to determine how much money is spent to operate each school, as is the case in many other school districts across the country. Data are collected in aggregate categories, such as teacher salaries, equipment and supplies, and maintenance costs for all schools in the system. They are neither easily extracted for individual schools, nor are they necessarily comparable. The distribution of financial resources by plant (i.e. each school), which is a basic principle in the operation of any large corporation in the private sector, is hidden from view and not a matter of public discussion.

Recommendations

Education policymakers in the District of Columbia can take at least seven steps to improve the present school system.

First, there should be a reassessment of the appropriateness of using the CTBS, Form U, as a measure of the basic skills needed for the 21st century, as well as the relationship of the CTBS to the curricula that supposedly are in place throughout the system.

Second, the school system should monitor and control more closely what teachers actually teach and how they teach. An earlier Institute report, "What's in a Norm?" called for an academic and ethnographic profile of successful teachers and their students compared to one of unsuccessful teachers and their students. This would include the qualifications of the teachers, their experience, pedagogical strategies, and the age and quality of the texts and materials they use.

Third, a student-based tracking system should be introduced to determine with greater accuracy the level of student mobility and which schools are most affected.

Fourth, there should be a public audit of how much money is spent by the government to maintain and operate each school.

Fifth, there should be full public disclosure of the funds raised by the PTA groups at each school

Table 5
Percent of Schools Below Norm by Ward

Ward	ES	JHS	SHS
1	75	100	50
2	58	75	0
3*	0	0	50
4	36	67	100
5	57	80	100
6	67	100	100
7	57	83	100
8	82	100	100

* Ward least seriously affected

Source: Institute summary, by ward, of median percentiles, D.C. Public Schools

Table 6
Enrollment in Public Schools by Ethnic Group, 1990

	ES	JHS	SHS
Asian Americans	459	136	174
African Americans	45,471	11,822	15,165
Hispanic Americans	2,307	653	774
Native Americans	7	10	5
European Americans	2,240	272	340
Total	50,484	12,893	16,458

[Excludes special educ. and post secondary day schools]

Source: Student Membership, 1990, D.C. Public Schools

Table 7
Elementary School Enrollment Top 10 in Reading, 1990

Ethnic Group	Enrollment	Percent of Ethn. Group
Asian Americans	82	18
African Americans	1,967	4
Hispanic Americans	111	5
Native Americans	1	14
European Americans	1,189	53
Total	3,350	7

Source: Student Membership, 1990, D.C. Public Schools

to supplement the basic curriculum, equipment, and materials that are offered by the government.

Sixth, as budget increases are requested for the school system, equity demands that resources should be pro-rated to the city wards that most need them.

Seventh, the research arm of the D.C. public schools should be removed from the jurisdiction of system administrators, who have a vested interest in presenting the most favorable data either to preserve the status quo or to secure higher annual funding. Instead, there should be an independent Office of Academic Accountability, reporting equally to the school board, the mayor, the city council, and the public.

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Appendix

Source Data for Improvement and Decline in D.C. Schools

(Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills, Form U, Reading, 1990)

City Ward	ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS	1989 PR	1990 PR	CHANGE 89-90
SCHOOLS IMPROVED/REMAINED THE SAME:				
7	Fletcher-Johnson	29	75	46
6	Gibbs	45	82	37
7	Houston	40	77	37
2	Van Ness	31	66	35
4	Petworth	45	73	28
3	Hardy	63	89	26
4	Whittier	54	74	20
8	Garfield	32	51	19
7	Harris	39	54	15
1	Cleveland	44	58	14
2	Amidon	51	65	14
7	Merritt	38	51	13
2	Montgomery	39	51	12
7	River Terrace	63	75	12
1	Lewis	39	50	11
6	Bryan	30	41	11
7	Davis	25	35	10
7	Shadd	50	60	10
8	McGogney	37	47	10
7	Beers	52	61	9
1	Bancroft	40	48	8
7	Carver	32	40	8
7	Drew	32	40	8
3	Lafayette	86	93	7
3	Murch	86	93	7
4	Barnard	52	59	7
4	LaSalle	49	56	7
5	Burroughs	63	70	7
6	Ludlow Taylor	32	39	7
2	Bowen	32	37	5
4	Shepherd	71	76	5
6	Orr	57	62	5
1	Park View	29	32	3
4	Clark	33	36	3
5	Langdon	59	62	3
7	Aiton	47	50	3
7	Richardson	40	43	3
3	Mann	89	91	2
4	Takoma	61	63	2
6	Goding	60	62	2
6	Ketcham	35	37	2
6	Maury	47	49	2
8	Hendley	33	35	2
8	Simon	41	43	2
1	Reed, M	43	44	1
3	Oyster	73	74	1
5	Noyes	35	36	1
1	Harrison	34	34	0
2	Stevens	56	56	0
2	Wilson, JO	49	49	0
6	Payne	43	43	0
6	Stanton	48	48	0
8	Leckie	53	53	0

City Ward	ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS	1989 PR	1990 PR	CHANGE 89-90
SCHOOLS DECLINED:				
5	Slater-Langston	40	39	-1
5	Slowe	77	76	-1
1	Gage Eckington	38	36	-2
4	Keene	57	55	-2
4	West	53	51	-2
5	Fort Lincoln	55	53	-2
5	Webb	37	35	-2
6	Tyler	30	28	-2
7	Nalle	38	36	-2
7	Randle Highlands	41	39	-2
2	Walker-Jones	47	44	-3
3	Eaton	76	73	-3
8	Friendship	38	35	-3
8	King, Jr., M.L.	39	36	-3
1	Bruce-Monroe	53	49	-4
3	Janney	90	86	-4
5	Emery	37	33	-4
1	Adams	46	41	-5
5	Shaed	53	48	-5
7	Burrville	61	56	-5
8	Terrell, MC	46	41	-5
1	Cooke, HD	45	39	-6
1	Tubman	37	31	-6
2	Thomson	51	45	-6
4	Powell	49	43	-6
7	Plummer	38	32	-6
4	Raymond	33	26	-7
4	Rudolph	58	51	-7
6	Kingsman	45	38	-7
7	Kimball	52	45	-7
7	Thomas	60	53	-7
5	Young	46	37	-9
6	Brent	53	44	-9
7	Benning	54	45	-9
8	Draper	35	26	-9
2	Garrison	44	34	-10
2	Seaton	72	62	-10
3	Hearst	83	73	-10
8	Green	73	63	-10
1	Meyer	64	53	-11
2	Syphax	43	32	-11
8	Patterson	39	28	-11
8	Turner	43	32	-11
4	Brightwood	58	46	-12
5	Wheatley	63	51	-12
8	Savoy	46	34	-12
8	Malcolm X	41	28	-13
4	Truesdell	47	31	-16
8	Birney	41	25	-16
8	Moten	46	30	-16
5	Woodridge	43	26	-17
5	Bunker-Hill	75	54	-21
6	Miner	94	73	-21

CITY WARD	ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS	1989 PR	1990 PR	CHANGE 89-90
SCHOOLS DECLINED:				
2	Ross	42	18	-24
6	Blow	59	34	-25
7	Smothers	63	38	-25
8	Washington-Highland	54	29	-25
5	Brookland	59	33	-26
7	Kenilworth	59	29	-30
7	Weatherless	54	23	-31
7	Winston	61	30	-31
6	Giddings	66	n/a	n/a

TOTAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS = 115
TOTAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS WITH DATA = 114

CITY WARD	JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS	1989 PR	1990 PR	CHANGE 89-90
IMPROVED/REMAINED THE SAME:				
5	Browne	42	84	42
4	Rabaut	30	50	20
7	Woodson, C.G.	24	36	12
1	Lincoln	22	31	9
7	Roper	24	33	9
8	Hart	36	43	7
5	Backus	30	34	4
7	Sousa	52	56	4
5	Hamilton	30	33	3
SCHOOLS DECLINED:				
2	Francis	42	41	-1
3	Deal	64	62	-2
5	Taft	49	47	-2
8	Johnson	27	25	-2
4	Paul	39	36	-3
6	Kramer	26	23	-3
8	Friendship	27	24	-3
6	Eliot	37	33	-4
7	Evans	40	36	-4
7	Fletcher-Johnson	23	19	-4
2	Shaw	44	38	-6
7	Miller	44	38	-6
1	Garnet Patterson	28	21	-7
6	Hine	35	27	-8
2	Jefferson	63	54	-9
4	MacFarland	40	28	-12
2	Terrell, R.H.	39	21	-18
5	Langley	52	31	-21
8	Douglass	59	23	-36

TOTAL JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS = 28

CITY WARD	SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS	1989 PR	1990 PR	CHANGE 89-90
SCHOOLS IMPROVED/REMAINED THE SAME:				
7	Woodson, H.D.	30	35	5
1	Banneker	76	77	1
3	Wilson, W.	52	53	1
SCHOOLS DECLINED:				
4	Coolidge	34	33	-1
4	Roosevelt	28	24	-4
5	Spingarn	25	21	-4
8	Ballou	26	21	-5
1	Cardozo	30	24	-6
2	School W/O Walls	63	56	-7
5	McKinley	36	27	-9
6	Eastern	38	27	-11
3	Ellington	56	44	-12
6	Anacostia	36	20	-16
5	Dunbar	58	37	-21

TOTAL SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS = 14